Give a timeline and brief synopsis of the 'waves of persecution' against Christians implemented by Rome from 70 A.D. to 313 A.D.

The so-called “waves of persecution” from 70–313 are a retrospective schematic; in reality hostility was intermittent, varied by region, and only rarely empire-wide. Still, one can outline major “waves” under particular emperors whose policies significantly affected Christians in this period.[1] [2] [3]

From 70 to Domitian (81–96)

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, Roman attention focused on Jewish revolt, not specifically on Christians, though Jewish-Christian communities were indirectly affected. Under Domitian (81–96), some Christians seem to have suffered when refusal to participate in the imperial cult was treated as impiety or treason, with Revelation reflecting this climate of localized but real pressure.[2] [1]

Second-century localized persecutions

In the second century, persecutions were mostly provincial and reactive: Christians might be prosecuted when denounced, but there was no empire-wide hunt. Under Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius, governors could execute Christians who refused to sacrifice, and classic martyr acts (Ignatius, Polycarp, Lyon and Vienne, Justin) arise from this ad hoc but recurring pattern.[4] [1]

Septimius Severus (c. 202) and third-century escalation

Around 202, Septimius Severus issued an edict forbidding conversions to Christianity (and Judaism), leading to sharp persecutions in regions such as North Africa (e.g., Perpetua and Felicity). This marks a transition toward more intentional imperial involvement, though still not a universal, systematic attempt to eradicate the church.[3] [1]

Decius (249–251) and Valerian (257–260)

Decius inaugurated the first clearly empire-wide persecution by requiring all inhabitants to perform sacrifice and obtain libelli certificates; refusal marked one as a Christian (or other dissenter) and could mean imprisonment, torture, or death. Valerian followed with edicts targeting clergy and Christian elites: assemblies and cemetery gatherings were restricted, leading bishops such as Fabian and Cyprian, along with many others, to exile or martyrdom until toleration under Gallienus in 260.[5] [6] [1] [4] [3]

Diocletian’s “Great Persecution” (303–313)

The final and most systematic “wave” came under Diocletian and his colleagues, when a series of edicts ordered churches destroyed, Scriptures burned, Christian civil rights revoked, clergy imprisoned, and ultimately all inhabitants required to sacrifice to the traditional gods. This Great Persecution varied in intensity across the tetrarchs’ territories, but it remained the harshest and most coordinated attempt to suppress Christianity until halted by Galerius’ edict of toleration in 311 and effectively ended by Constantine’s and Licinius’ Edict of Milan in 313.[7] [5] [1] [2]

Schematic “wave” models versus historical nuance

Later Christian writers and some modern popular treatments compress this complex history into “ten persecutions” or similar numbered schemes running from Nero through Diocletian, but these are theological or pedagogical constructs rather than a precise legal chronology. Modern scholarship emphasizes that between these headline episodes there were long stretches of relative peace, ongoing low-level harassment, and local mob violence, so that persecution is better seen as irregular surges within a broader, fluctuating environment of suspicion than as one continuous imperial program.[8] [9] [10] [1] [3]

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1. https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/History-Persecutions.htm
2. https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-timeline
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4. https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/persecution-in-early-church-gallery
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9. https://crcbermuda.com/reference2/online-books/the-two-republics/chapter-iv-the-ten-persecutions
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